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PRESCRIBED READING IN LATIN, 1923-1925

For the years 1923, 1924, 1925 the College Entrance Examination Board has fixed, as the prescribed reading in poetry, Aeneid 1 and 4, and selections from the Metamorphoses of Ovid, as follows: 3.1-137 (Cadmus); 4.55-166 (Pyramus and Thisbe); 4.663-764 (Perseus and Andromeda); 6.165-312 (Niobe); 8.183-235 (Dae-dalus and Icarus); 10.1-77 (Orpheus and Eurydice); 11.85-145 (Midas).

In Cicero, the prescription includes the Fourth Oration Against Catiline and the Oration For the Manilian Law.

C. K.

NATURE IN OVID

In THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY 14.49-51, 57-58, under the caption The Love of Nature in Vergil, I called attention to an important book, entitled The Love of Nature Among the Romans During the Later Decades of the Republic and the First Century of the Empire, by Sir Archibald Geikie, a well known English geologist (London, John Murray, 1912), and gave some extracts from the book, illustrating Vergil's love of the country, especially of his birthplace, and of country life. I took the opportunity which this discussion offered to consider Horace's attitude toward his birthplace, as set forth in the famous Exegi monumentum ode (3.30), and, finally, Cicero's attitude toward Arpinum. There were remarks also on the attitude which the Italian country towns maintained towards those who, after going out from them, reached fame at the capital.

Since, for this year and for two more years to come, at least, Ovid enters into the prescribed reading in Latin poetry, as fixed by the College Entrance Examination Board, it seems worth while to present here some extracts from Sir Archibald Geikie's book which deal with the place that nature has in the poetry of Ovid (pages 100-107). I think he underestimates two things: (1) Ovid's ceaseless avoidance of seriousness, especially of the appearance of serious and deep emotion, and the fact that, inevitably, in his appeals from Tomi for remission or at least mitigation of his punishment, he would exaggerate the discomforts of life at Tomi. To accept at their face value those descriptions is not the way to understand Ovid.

It is in his relation to Nature, however, that we have to consider Ovid here. Above and beyond his interest in the gallantries, frivolities, and dissipations of the fashionable circles in which he moved, he had a poet's eye for much of the beauty and charm of the outer world. Even his amatory poetry, which includes his most brilliant as well as his least pleasing work, contains phrases, lines, and longer passages which indicate

a love of Nature. In treating of the myths and legends of Greece and Italy, and the sacred and secular customs and traditions of Rome, he had a boundless field for the exercise of his peculiar gifts. Many of these tales had been told over and over again. But Ovid recognised that as they had little or no foundation in written history, it was allowable to clothe them anew in such garb as seemed to him most picturesque, acting on his own maxim, "Si poteris, vere, si minus, apte tamen"¹. This dressing-up of old myths afforded him the opportunity to surround his personages with a background of natural scenery, and to paint little vignette landscapes that bring the quiet beauty of Nature into prominent relief. His favourite scene, if we may judge from the frequency with which he introduces it into his poems, seems to have been the popular combination of shady woodland and still or murmuring water². The pictures which he draws, however, are usually of a characteristically generalised type. They seldom appeal to us as taken directly from Nature or from recollections that had deeply imprinted themselves on the poet's mind, and were recalled in their details, with something like the affection so delightfully indicated in the episodes and similes of Virgil. The various scenic features and the way in which they are grouped by Ovid suggest that they were not so much objects which he loved to think of, to allude to, and to describe, as convenient or necessary materials for the background or setting wherein he sought to place the story or legend which he desired to tell. Sometimes, indeed, it would seem that just as the grouping of the figures in one of his tales occasionally reminds us of some mythological picture or group of statuary, so these pictorial landscapes or backgrounds have a somewhat artificial or conventional character, as if suggested rather by the recollection of pictures than of scenes actually beheld and cherished in recollection. We do not seem to breathe the very air of the places, as Virgil makes us do by the light touch of a few vivid words.

Yet Ovid was gifted with a rare power of description. He could tell a tale with a brilliance of fancy, an artistic faculty in the grouping of incidents, and a skill in the choice of words such as hardly any other poet of ancient or modern times has equalled. This genius for narrative was united to an unrivalled facility in verse-making. The copious flow of his musical language rolls on from one subject to another, not only without apparent effort, but with the easy grace of a consummate master of his art. Its very perfection is apt to become monotonous, while his evident delight in the exercise of his gift of narration sometimes makes him lose the sense of proportion and overload his pictures with a detail that detracts from their breadth, and occasionally becomes tedious and irrelevant.

Ovid's art is thus always conspicuous. Nowhere is this characteristic more apparent than in the arrangement and description of the surroundings of the actors in one of his mythological legends. There is generally an umbrageous wood throwing a coolness over some spring or stream or lake. The margin of the water is bordered with soft turf which is kept green by the

¹Ars Am. 1.228.

²Compare Fasti 6. 9-10 Est nemus arboribus densum, secretus ab omni voce locus, si non obstraperetur aquis.